SHIKSHANTAR, INDIA
FROM TRANSACTING TO GIFTING

Sarita kare na paan, vriksh na fal chaakhe kadi
Khet na khave dhaan, parhit neepjey sekhra.

The river never drinks its own water.
The tree never tastes its own fruit.
The field never consumes its own harvest.
They selflessly strive for the well-being of all those around them.

—Mewari proverb, India

Here is a dream of India.

Gandhi, Krishnamurti, Tagore, Vandana Shiva, and Arundhati Roy[59] are sitting beneath the shade of a banyan tree, its thick limbs dangling rootlets down toward the cracked earth. The air is thick and wet, a premonsoon heat wave of more than 110 degrees. These great sages of then and now are sipping chai together and discussing their favorite topics—poetry, philosophy, activism. Krishnamurti opens the conversation with a question.[60]

Krishnamurti: Does life have a meaning, a purpose? Is not living in itself its own purpose, its own meaning? Why do we want more?

Tagore: The greed of gain has no time or limit to its capaciousness. Its one object is to produce and consume. It has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. It is ruthlessly ready without a moment's hesitation to crush beauty and life out of them, molding them into money.

Gandhi: God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West . . . keeping the world in chains. If our nation took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.

Roy: The structure of capitalism is flawed. The motor that powers it cannot but vastly increase the disparity between the poor and the rich globally and within countries as well.

Shiva: The ecological economy is an economy of renewal where you have six foot of bamboo growing in a few months, or a new goat in seven months. But we're creating scarcity in an abundant world. Poverty is a human creation—nature doesn't create scarcity—human systems do.

Gandhi: I suggest that we are thieves in a way. If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I thieve it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world.

Tagore: Our living society, which should have dance in its steps, music in its voice, beauty in its limbs, which should have its metaphor in stars and flowers, maintaining its harmony with God's creation, becomes, under the tyranny of prolific greed, like an overladen market-cart jolting and creaking on the road that leads from things to the Nothing, tearing ugly ruts across the green life till it breaks down under the burden of its vulgarity, on the wayside, reaching nowhere.

Roy: People are so isolated, and so alone, and so suspicious, and so competitive with each other, and so sure that they are about to be conned by their neighbor, or by their mother, or by their sister, or their grandmother. What's the use of having . . . whatever it is that you have, if you're going to live this pathetic, terrified life?

Gandhi [winking]: No doubt, capital is lifeless, but not the capitalists who are amenable to conversion.

Tagore: The best of us still have our aspirations for the supreme goals of life, which is so often mocked by prosperous people who now control the world. We still believe that the world has a deeper meaning than what is apparent, and that therein the human soul finds its ultimate harmony and peace. We still know that only in spiritual wealth does civilization attain its end, not in a prolific production of materials, and not in the competition of intemperate power with power.

Krishnamurti: Surely a man who is living richly, a man who sees things as they are and is content with what he has, is not confused; he is clear, therefore he does not ask what is the purpose of life. For him the very living is the beginning and the end.

Shiva: In nature's economy the currency is not money, it is life.

Gandhi: Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* [freedom or self-rule] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.

Krishnamurti: In oneself lies the whole world and if you know how to look and learn, the door is there and the key is in your hand. Nobody on earth can give you either the key or the door to open, except yourself.

Tagore: I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.

THE CALL FOR *SWARAJ*

You may have already formed an impression of Shikshantar before ever setting foot in India. This is the learning center in Udaipur where Daniel encountered the double edges of frustration and joy in inventing anew the *cycle mixie*. It is the place where *kabaad se jugaad* (the upcycling practice that you first encountered in Mexico) has transcended practice and become a philosophy—a spirituality even—for transmuting garbage into grace through hardy ingenuity. Shikshantar is steeped in philosophy, brewed from a rich mix of poets, sages, scholars, grandmothers, dreamers, writers, storytellers, and artists. Gandhi's concept of *swaraj* is its primary ingredient, the black tea into which all the other spices are infused—Tagore, Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo, Vinoba Bhave,[61] as well as the wisdom of common people, everyday life, elders, and *dalits* (untouchables). This is your invitation to taste swaraj, to roll the complexity of India around on your tongue. You don't have to understand it—just put a few of these sentences from Shikshantar in your pocket, carry them around with you, pull them out occasionally for refreshment.

> The call for swaraj represents a genuine attempt to regain control of the "self"—our self-respect, self-responsibility, and capacities for self-realization—from institutionalization; that is, the submission of the human spirit to the will of institutions. As Gandhi states, "It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves."
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> Swaraj requires that we regain our faith in the capacity of human beings and restore agency, the locus of power, back to individual and local communities.
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> The process of swaraj seeks to create a reflective and participatory context for people to ask who we have been, who we are, and who we want to become.

This feels like heady stuff, doesn't it? What are you expecting to find when you walk into the Shikshantar learning space in Udaipur, the City of Lakes in the state of Rajasthan? What images of India are you carrying around with you? Are they images of poverty—beggar children tugging at you for change, overcrowded streets, rivers polluted with plastic debris? Are they images of technology—call centers and tech support and professional outsourcing? Are they images of Bollywood, Hindu gods and goddesses, men playing sitars and women in saris dancing?

Here is another image of India—one in which people are practicing swaraj by rejecting today's ready-made world, a world in which everything we consume has been processed and prepackaged by someone else: ready-made clothes, ready-made food, ready-made homes, ready-made education, ready-made medicine, ready-made entertainment. Here, instead, is an image of Shikshantar, a place whose purpose is to provoke new thinking about education.

I had heard about Shikshantar for years before I made my first visit in 2005. Through our work together at Berkana, Manish Jain, one of Shikshantar's co-founders, had become a colleague and close friend. But no matter how many long and late-night conversations we would have about Shikshantar's approach to rethinking education, I couldn't wrap my mind around what they actually *did*. Manish talked repeatedly about swaraj, Gandhi's invitation to take responsibility for ourselves. He would patiently explain how Shikshantar's work was to experiment with creating our own learning, weaning ourselves from the ready-made world where all that's expected of us is to be good consumers.

When I arrived at Shikshantar, I observed a hive in action—people everywhere discovering and inventing their own unique ways to grow and prepare food, maintain health, construct household goods, tell stories, create art. At first, there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to their activities. Everyone carried on with his or her own vision, forming partnerships and teams as needed. It was only after a full week immersed in this lively environment that I began to see what held the whole together. Shikshantar's coherence is derived from its shared values and beliefs that serve as an underground aquifer nourishing all the activity above the surface. That aquifer runs deep, saturated with India's three-thousand-year-old philosophical and spiritual heritage—which is why it matters to listen to the voices of the wise men and women who have come before. And which is why we began our journey to India the only way we could have—with the insights of the wisdom-keepers who have shaped everything Shikshantar is today.

Deborah

It is 9 A.M. It is 3 P.M. It is 8 P.M. It doesn't matter: The scene is the same. At every time of day, people come and go, following their own personal rhythm of work, play, rest, and surprise. On the left as you walk in, Guddi is sitting at the *charka*, spinning cotton into string which can be made into clothes or bags. Through the doorway, Vishal is practicing kabaad se jugaad by rolling old newspapers into long, thin tubes that will be woven into baskets and bowls. A pile of CDs awaits his attention for becoming a lampshade. Nirmal is sawing away at a piece of coconut shell out of which he will make earrings and necklaces to display at next week's Hamo Desi Mela, the monthly festival where community members exchange locally grown organic food, herbal medicine, and handicrafts. Pannalal wanders in, returning from Sandeep's urban garden carrying a cabbage covered

with a fine dust of ash, which has served as a natural insect repellant. He delivers the cabbage to Sunny, a sixteen-year-old who has devoted himself to experiments in oil-free food and healthy cooking. He is preparing the cabbage for today's lunch, which will be chopped, flavored, and delivered in a blackened pot to the roof, where Manoj has set up his upcycled solar cooker. The cooker is made from a rusted trunk, broken mirror, rubber tire tubes, and an old car windshield, all of which were found discarded throughout the neighborhood. Ram is also outdoors tending the herbal nursery that will provide the primary ingredients for homemade medicine, soap, tooth powder, and massage oil.

Everyone here is following their passion, working at their own pace. But this is hardly rugged individualism. This is a hive where each member has his or her unique function to perform in service of the whole. There is order here, but it may feel like chaos. Who is in charge? What are the priorities? Where are decisions being made? This is truly an experiment in self-organization, where each person pursues his or her own work rooted in the same shared beliefs. Very different projects emerge, yet they form a well-coordinated, orderly and effective whole. Here, those beliefs are based on swaraj, the commitment to walk our own path in the world.

That is why you don't always see Manish and Shilpa and Vidhi Jain here—the team that co-created this place. The formal kind of directive leadership is not needed here. These three are out in the community right now. Vidhi, Manish's wife, is organizing a gathering for the Families Learning Together network, a group that is exploring what life would look like if families—rather than schools—were at the center of learning experiences.

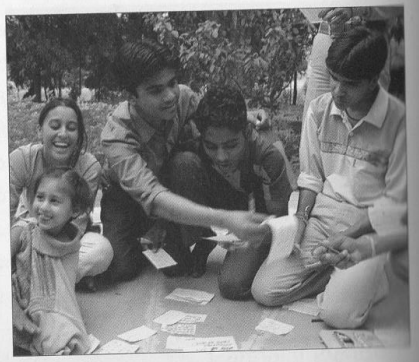
Sunny prepares lunch; Manoj then cooks it on the roof in an upcycled solar cooker made from a rusted trunk, broken mirror, rubber tire tubes, and an old car windshield.

Shilpa, Manish's sister, is talking with other bicycle enthusiasts to prepare for the upcoming *cycle yatra*, a weeklong, money-free bicycle journey that will explore what it means to fully engage in gift culture. Manish is visiting one of the elders who is part of "Udaipur as a Learning City," a citywide effort to reclaim informal learning spaces such as recreational areas, neighborhood and cultural associations, arts, and community media. Citizens throughout Udaipur are working together to reweave intergenerational relationships among artists, farmers, workers, healers, craftspeople, educators, storytellers, and politicians, and among children, adults, and elders.

You, too, are being invited to venture out into Udaipur. Rohit, a twelve-year-old apprentice, is asking you to join him on the daily *gobar* run. Don't ask any questions; just say yes and grab a bucket as you walk out the door.

The streets outside Shikshantar are narrow and winding, crowded with cars, rickshaws, scooters, tourists—and quite a few cows. Yes, the rumor is true: Cows are sacred in India. While long revered by Hindus for their production of milk, ghee (clarified butter), and dung, cows were politicized in the late 1800s when protecting them became a movement to mobilize Hindus against British imperialism. Today in Delhi, for instance, more than forty thousand cows share the capital's overcrowded streets with thirteen million residents—that's one free-range cow for every 325 city dwellers![62] The good news about this—if you're practicing swaraj and rejecting the ready-made world—is that fuel, the cow dung kind, is abundant and free.

Rohit leads the way down quieter streets, moving away from the city center until you come to an outdoor crematorium. Here, other gobar collectors hesitate to go, so it is easy to find fresh loads. He points out a heap of day-old dung drying in the sunshine. You are meant to pick this up with



Whether making fuel chips, soap or soil, mixing *gobar* gets you back in touch with the natural world. The Shikshantar team is like family—they eat, play, work and invent together.

your ungloved hands—an opportunity literally to get back in touch with the natural world—and deposit it in your bucket. Do you recoil at this? Take a breath and reflect: You've probably been dousing your body for years in unnatural chemicals; what's so alarming about natural ones? Besides, humans have been harvesting dung for fuel ever since we became co-dependent on cattle. As it is, of today's 840 million Indians who live in rural villages, nearly half of their domestic fuel requirements are met by India's 280 million cows.[63] Making fuel from cow dung is easy. Just grab a handful and shape it into patties, about Frisbee-sized. Lay the patties out to dry. The sun will take care of the rest, and soon you'll have easy-to-use fuel chips.

Today's gobar, however, has a different fate. It will be transformed into *amrit jal*, "the drink of the gods," a fast-track process for creating fertile soil. Here's the recipe: First, you'll collect several bucketfuls of gobar and haul them back to Shikshantar. Next, add some water, cow urine, jaggery (hardened molasses), and stir. No, not with a stick or a ladle. With your *arm*, right up to the elbow, creating cool circles of ooze. This should amplify the redolent bouquet of manure, which will help reconnect you, no doubt, to organic living. Be sure to use your left hand; this is the practice in India, since people eat with their right. Mix it all up until the texture feels like a thick, goopy sludge. Wait three days, stirring occasionally, and then add water. On the fourth day, add brown biomass (leaves, grass, and straw) and soak the mixture overnight. When it's ready, you can alternate layers of amrit jal with sand and topsoil, forty layers deep, and wait another hundred days. This will produce *amrit mitti*, "the soil of the gods," rich organic soil that can be used for raised beds or poured on top of chemically compromised soil, which ordinarily can take up to three years to convert.[64]

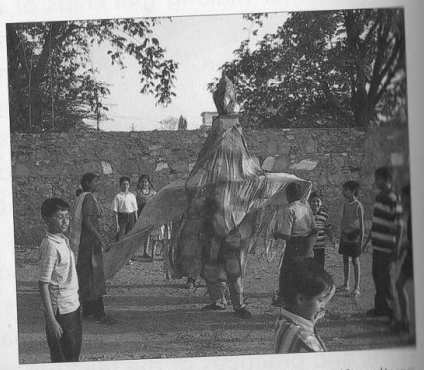
Whether making fuel chips or accelerating soil conversion, there is wisdom in this process. It harnesses a resource that is freely available to ease the burden of daily energy consumption—and enables self-reliance. Traditional wisdom has it that burning gobar to fuel kitchen fires maintains the perfect temperature to ensure that nutrients in food are not destroyed by overheating. When burned in combination with neem leaves, gobar smoke serves as mosquito repellent. Gobar soap, made with neem and aloe vera, clears rashes and pimples. When mixed with clay to form floor tiles and adobe walls, gobar helps houses breathe and regulate temperature. And gobar can be converted as bio-gas into electricity.

For Shikshantar, collecting gobar is part of its challenge to the patterns and practices of the ready-made world. In modern culture, most of us have become blind to the resources that nature so abundantly provides,

and we've become ashamed of manual labor. Gobar, collected and transformed with our hands, is just one means of reconnecting us to Earth's unending riches.

Just as you finish washing up in time for lunch, Manish returns, bringing his little daughter Kanku with him. She, too, is part of the Shikshantar family, a full-time learner and mischievous sprite who immediately wants to know, in bits of English sprinkled with Hindi, who you are and why you're here. She grabs your hand and runs you around the room, pointing out the drawings and collages and posters that plaster the walls, the giant puppets and handmade masks that hang from the ceiling, the rows and rows of books and DVDs, many of which have been produced and published by Shikshantar and its friends. People are coming into this room from every direction to sit cross-legged on the floor and share the community lunch. After all, this is a family, just not one created entirely by blood, and like nearly all families everywhere, they break bread together—in this case, corn *rotis*—as a means of reconnecting. Be careful how much you accept this first time around. Ram is going to spoon steaming heaps of rice, *patta gobhi,* and *dal* on your plate. Before you've finished, he'll come around again. And he'll keep coming around to give you more than you could possibly eat until you learn how to play this game that pits Indian hospitality against Western resolve. Just know that you will likely lose as you work your way through every last morsel on your plate, which must be wiped clean before Ram himself will finally sit down to eat his meal of whatever remains in the pot.

There is a saying in India: *Atithi Devo Bhava*, a Sanskrit phrase meaning "The guest is god." The phrase has been co-opted by the tourism industry,



Manish Jain, co-founder of Shikshantar, invites friends and colleagues into an exploration of gift culture. Children and Shikshantar volunteers make giant puppets and perform free shows for the community.

but it originated in the Upanishads, ancient Hindu texts that proclaimed feeding the guest—including the stranger—to be the noblest of all acts. Thus is hospitality gifted, not earned. No equal exchange of value must first be agreed upon. Perhaps Ram's generosity offers you a glimpse into one of Shikshantar's most essential, most heartfelt explorations: a journey into *gift culture*, the antidote to our ubiquitous transactional culture that has turned the accumulation of material resources into a near-sacred pursuit the world over. What if, just what if, in Manish's words, we were invited back into our sacred role as active gift givers—from *Homo economicus* to *Homo giftus*?

HOMO ECONOMICUS VERSUS *HOMO GIFTUS*

Manish Jain has been exploring the dynamics of gift culture since he began his work at Shikshantar in 1999. Born in India and raised in the United States, Manish returned to India to "unlearn" his master's degree in education from Harvard and his training as an investment banker at Morgan Stanley. He holds this paradox with grace, his tall frame draped in *kurtas* one day and Western shirts the next, digging in the dirt today and flying off to keynote an international conference tomorrow. But little makes him happier than spending the afternoon at Shikshantar engaged in long, intoxicating conversations that challenge our assumptions about the world. Today will be no exception as Manish invites you into an inquiry about gift culture, which he begins by quoting Indian activist and former Jain monk Satish Kumar: [65]

> We have learned much from the native Americans, the Australian Aboriginals, the indigenous peoples of India (*adivasis*) and the Bushmen of Africa. We have been guided by Jesus Christ, the Buddha, Mohammed and Mahavir. We have been inspired by Valmiki, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen and many other writers. We have benefited from the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. They were not motivated by fame, fortune or power. Buddha claimed no copyright on his teachings, and Shakespeare received no royalty cheques. We have been enchanted by music, paintings, architecture and crafts of many cultures, from time immemorial. We have received a treasure house of traditions as a free gift.
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> In return, we offer our work, our creativity, our arts and crafts, our agriculture and architecture as gifts to society—to present and future generations. When we are motivated by this spirit, then work is not a burden. It is not a duty. It is not a responsibility. We are not even the doers of our work. Work flows through us and not from us. We do not own our intellect,

> our creativity, or our skills. We have received them as a gift and grace. We pass them on as a gift and grace; it is like a river which keeps flowing. All the tributaries make the river great. We are the tributaries adding to the great river of time and culture; the river of humanity. If tributaries stop flowing into the river, if they become individualistic and egotistical, if they put terms and conditions before they join the rivers, they will dry and the rivers will dry, too. To keep the rivers flowing, all tributaries have to join in with joy and without conditions. In the same way, all individual arts, crafts and other creative activities make up the river of humanity. We need not hold back, we need not block the flow. This is unconditional union. This is the great principle of *dana.* This is how society and civilizations are replenished.

Dana is a Sanskrit term meaning "generosity" or "giving" without any expectation of return. It is a way of being in the world that flips self-interest on its head. A life well lived is one in which we each find an opportunity to *give our gifts* rather than to *have our needs met*. Our purpose is defined by what we offer, rather than what we can secure for ourselves and our families.

Contrast this with the values of transactional culture—the one that prevails throughout the global marketplace—in which everything we need to live comes to us through a process of exchange based on money. Over time, what has emerged and solidified the world over is a global culture that invites us to consume as much as we can and hoard money and material possessions.

Here are a few more beliefs by which *Homo economicus* chooses to live: Value can be quantified and measured; my sense of security is derived from the quantity of resources I have rather than the quality of relationships I'm in. I have a right to acquire as many resources as I can; I have a right to extract natural resources from the earth. The surpluses I generate belong to me; I should store them to produce future wealth. Since price goes up when supply is constrained, inducing scarcity can generate wealth.

What are the consequences of *Homo economicus's* way of life? We buy and sell our homes and our land, our labor and our ideas—even our bodies and organs are for sale. Nothing is beyond the reach of this transactional culture.

But wait. Before getting all worked up about how *bad* this system is—or how *good* it is—it might be worth pausing for a moment to look at it as just, well, a system.

In *Reinventing the Sacred*, biologist Stuart Kauffman writes, "The industrialized world is seen to be, and is, largely consumer oriented, materialistic,

and commodified. How strange this world would seem to medieval Europe. . . . We of the industrialized world forget that our current value system is only one of a range of choices. We desperately need a global ethic that is richer than our mere concern about ourselves as consumers."[66]

Transactional culture was not inevitable. It is not human nature. It's just our culture. But we each have a story about why it is so. Perhaps it is a Darwinian tale that says he who can secure resources for himself and his family is most fit to survive. Or maybe it's an economic and political tale that heralds the triumph of capitalism over communism, socialism, and fascism. Or even a pragmatic story about accepting *the way it is* because it feels unimaginable to challenge a system that has created the global marketplace.

There is an ancient Jewish folktale that depicts a man who visits hell, amazed to find its inhabitants all seated at long tables, with fancy tablecloths, beautiful silverware, and bountiful food in front of them. Yet no one was eating, and all of them were wailing. When he looked closely, he saw that none of them could bend their elbows; thus, although they could touch the food, no one could bring it to his mouth. The visitor then goes to heaven, where the scene is identical: long tables, fancy tablecloths, beautiful silverware, and bountiful food. And here as well, people cannot bend their elbows, yet no one is wailing—because each person is serving his neighbor.[67]

Alternatives to transactional culture abound throughout the world, in both traditional and modern cultures. The indigenous peoples of Mexico practice *tequío*, the voluntary gifting of work and time—such as cleaning up a road or planting a garden—offered for the sake of the collective good. In Mali, *dama* is a pay-it-forward practice of keeping gifts on the move, circulating continually through the community. Students of Buddhism offer *dana* to their teachers, a formal spiritual act of giving that arises from the purity of heart in the giver and leads to greater spiritual wealth. Among Native American communities of the Pacific Northwest, the potlatch is a festival in which wealth is redistributed through reciprocity; the status of a family is determined not by how much is owned but by how much has been gifted to others. In India, *sewa* is a spirit of selfless service, performed without any expectation of reward or gain.

And the list goes on. *Butsu Butsu Kokan* in Japan. *Susu* in Trinidad and Tobago. The *Kula ring* in Papua New Guinea. *Aropa* among some Pacific Islanders. *Barn raising* among the Amish.

Homo giftus offers goods and services freely, without any expectation of return. Its value is measured by the quality of our relationships rather

than the quantity of our profit. Our capacity to give is infinite, unconstrained by shortages and fear of scarcity. Perhaps what's most incredible about the culture of *Homo giftus* is that it shows up every time our transactional culture breaks down—in times of human-made and natural disasters, grief and illness, celebration and joy.

What if *this* is human nature? How would we explore this dimension of ourselves? How could we rediscover our capacity to act with generosity and to receive gifts offered by others' generous impulses?

The folks at Shikshantar have an invitation for you, one that will immerse you in gift culture. It's called a *cycle yatra*.

CYCLE YATRA

Bin Paise Cycle Yatra, Chale, Chalo! Chale, Chalo! Cyclewalleh zindabad!
Money-Free Bicycle Journey, Let's Go! C'mon, Let's Go! Long Live the Bicycle Riders!

—Shilpa Jain

Twenty-five bicycles are parked outside Shikshantar, bedecked with ribbons and balloons, papier-mâché masks and puppetry, hand-held drums and flutes and whistles. Twenty-five riders are bustling around, strapping sleeping bags to rear racks and affixing signs to the handlebars: *Dosti* (Friendship), *Ram Bharose* (We're in God's hands), *Jaiso an vaiso man* (So we eat, so we are), *Apne seekh apne hath* (Our learning is in our hands). The riders themselves are adorned in garlands, head scarves, and bandanas. They are preparing for a weeklong *cycle yatra*, a journey out of the city and into the arms of whomever they might meet along the way.

Would you like to join this adventure? All you have to do is leave behind your money, credit cards, cell phone, iPod, snack food, and all things plastic. For you are entering Gift Culture, and there will be no monetary transactions this week. Over the next two hundred kilometers, you will secure your food and shelter with the gifts of your labor, your creativity, and your capacity to build relationships with strangers. You will practice surrender. Surrender to the tires that will burst on the unkempt dirt roads, surrender to the single gear that has the hills claim victory over your legs and your lungs, surrender to the brakes that may fail as you soar downhill—and to the wisdom of the veteran rider who advises under such circumstance that you wait for a curve in the road and then *jump!*

And you will receive the refreshment of floating in a cool lake, the soothing touch of fellow riders massaging your feet and walking on your tired back, the ambrosial rush that comes from sucking on bits of sugar cane from a passing field.

You may find yourself hauling stones and being offered a place to sleep, painting murals and receiving fresh buttermilk, singing songs and entertaining children and performing short plays just for the sheer delight. This is a world of reciprocity, the antithesis of the market, and there's no guarantee that what is exchanged will balance out. Here, you throw yourself into the hands of the universe and say, *I offer my gifts to you, and so shall others to me, strangers and friends alike.*

Can you trust this? Listen to Shilpa tell a story from her first *cycle yatra*:

> We had reached our "destination" (the point on the other end of our loop, from which we were going to start heading back to Udaipur): Jaisamand Lake. It was beautiful, and several people got in for a swim. The sun was hot, so we decided we would stay there 'til it dropped a bit and then make our way to a village for the night. In the meantime, we started chatting with all the different vendors there, who were curious about us and our bicycles. In a short time, we found ourselves painting a mural on the side of one of their stalls, chopping vegetables for the *chaat*, and soon performing the short plays, juggling and music we had prepared as offerings for the villages we visited. In return, we accepted tea, fruits and even camel rides!
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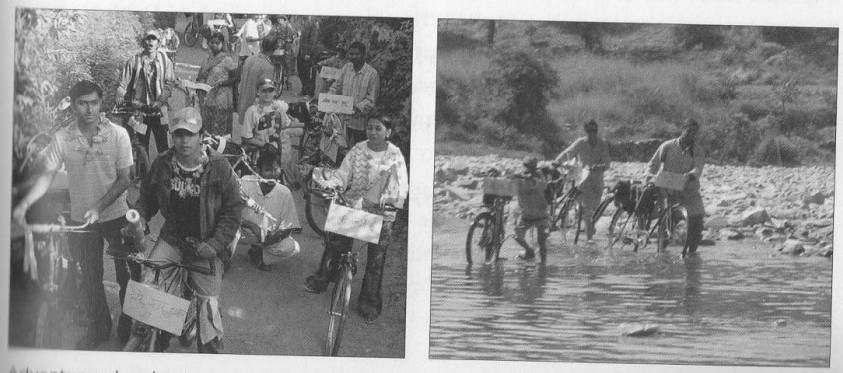
> Then, the boatmen, who take tourists as well as locals on the lake, asked if we would come to their island for the night. Their family had been living on the island for 400 years, and 65 family members lived there now. They helped us find a place to keep our bicycles for the night, and we



Adventurers head out on a *cycle yatra*, a money-free bicycle journey into the arms of gift culture, trusting that someone, somewhere, will provide food and shelter.

accompanied them at sunset to their homes on the island. Two by two, we each entered a home and chatted and cooked food with them and ate together. All the children gathered around us at night and we shared our tent and musical instruments with them and played games together. The stars that night, from an island floating in Asia's largest man-made lake, were astounding.

In the morning, we woke early and helped clean the cow and buffalo sheds. We pounded corn to release its kernels and helped collect it into bags. Some of the friends exchanged their knowledge of macramé, and we played some more games together. Then, the boatmen took us back to the shore, where we found our bicycles safe and sound. Pedaling away, we were all overwhelmed and delighted by the generosity and beauty of the entire experience. It had been magical.[68]

Are you willing to make yourself this vulnerable? To trust that someone, somewhere will provide? Can you give yourself over to a rhythm that is determined by the people you meet, the places you journey, and the experiences you participate in? Can you be this trusting of life?

When you return from the *yatra*, be gentle with yourself. It may seem strange to notice how much of our lives is devoted to consuming the ready-made world. It may be unsettling to discover how little is required to feel joyful and secure—and how freely those who have less than we do share what they have. We put so much effort into seeking security—accumulating wealth, advancing our career, acquiring things, planning for the future. How much of that security is real and how much illusion?

Of course we can't live in gift culture all the time. But we can taste it and we can begin to explore the edge between seeking security and trusting that we'll find what we need. We can experiment with what it would be like to participate in the transactional economy *just enough* to have what we need—and to gift out everything else. Instead of seeking always to acquire more, we might experiment with sufficiency.

This is exactly the experiment in which Mukesh Jat finds himself.

THE STORY OF MUKESH JAT

Here is the choice confronting Mukesh Jat: move to Indore, the commercial capital of central India's Madhya Pradesh, to find a job, or stay with his family in the village of Anjad to cobble together a livelihood. He's done it before—he worked for a water company in Indore earning 800 rupees ($17) per day. Quite a good income, actually. But his heart wasn't in it, and

As I've shared the story of Shikshantar's cycle yatras with friends and colleagues in the United States, I've been amazed by the emotion it provokes. Some people just light up, delighted by the idea of leaving their material possessions behind, envisioning that leap of faith as joyful, inspiring. Others are aghast—"At least take a cell phone!" they say. We all have different needs for safety and security. But security can also come from relationships rather than stuff, and gift culture is an invitation to deepen our relationships.

I've never been on a cycle yatra (though Manish says he's planning to correct that on my next trip to India). But I've witnessed the gift culture arise time and again here at home, especially when it's most needed. When I broke my leg, friends appeared to offer rides and run errands. When someone dies, we surround the mourners with food, love, and support. After Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, strangers opened their homes to each other. We offer our gifts in ordinary times as well, when we volunteer, lend an ear to a friend, do a favor for a neighbor. The gift culture is not extraordinary; it's alive and well, always.

Whether or not I do go on a cycle yatra, these stories have inspired me to believe that people are innately generous—that we *want* to give our time and talent to one another. It's in our nature to offer support to each other spontaneously, when we see a need or opportunity. Perhaps we really are best described as *Homo giftus*.

Deborah

he yearned for village life. Besides, things are different now. He is a newlywed and a new father, and with his mother also under his roof, he has a household of four to come home to. Which means he also has a household of four to support—and therein lies the dilemma.

So far, he has been trying to make it in the milk business. But no matter how productive Kali the cow might be, one cow is hardly enough to sustain a family of four. Besides, this particular cow is a troublemaker. Like her namesake, the goddess Kali the destroyer, this Kali has an aggressive side—kicking people, charging at women. Mukesh's mother has had enough and wants Mukesh to sell the cow.

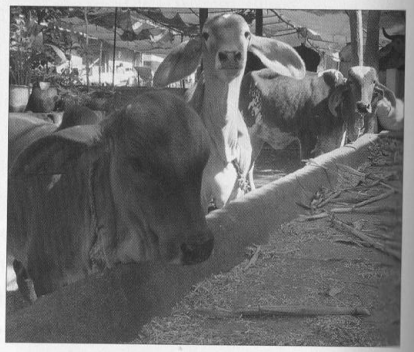
This is when Lakshmi intervenes, the goddess of wealth, she who has a fondness for cows.

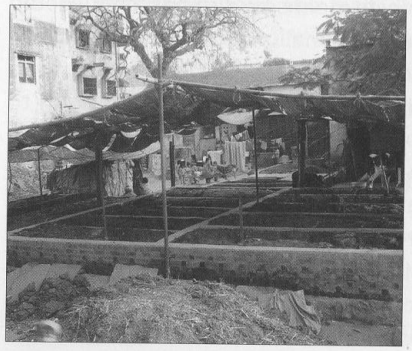
Like many villages throughout India, Anjad has been victim to the Green Revolution that transformed subsistence agriculture into industrial

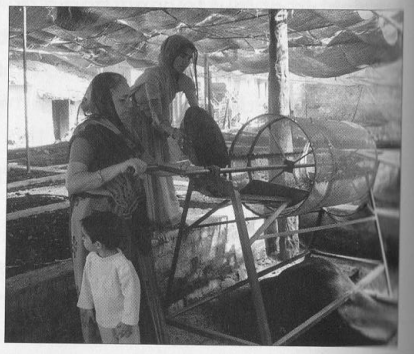
processes, dousing the land in chemical fertilizers and pesticides that are costly and toxic. Mukesh had witnessed the destructive impact of industrially farmed wheat on his own land, compromising the vitality of the soil and rendering its farmers' livelihoods dependent on a single crop.

Lakshmi must have been whispering into Mukesh's ear at night when he dreamed up the idea of building a bio-gas plant and producing organic fertilizer. It was all right there. In the corner of the small courtyard at Mukesh's home, Kali deposited all the gobar Mukesh would need to get started.

When you visit that courtyard today, you'll see the bio-gas pit into which Mukesh dumps dung and water in a one-to-one ratio. That feeds the digester, where methane is extracted and piped through to Mukesh's kitchen, supplanting the liquefied petroleum gas cylinders that Mukesh used to stand in line monthly to collect. In fact, Kali's gobar produces more gas than Mukesh's household needs, so he runs a second line to his uncle's







Clockwise from left: Mukesh Jat, Kali the cow, cleaning manure with the spinning wheel, composting in vermi-beds.

home nearby. It cost him 8,000 rupees (about $175) to build the system (funding that he accessed as a Berkana Fellow, one of the programs of The Berkana Institute that supports younger leaders in discovering right livelihood[69]). It took less than sixteen months to recoup his investment.

Next, Mukesh gathers up the sludge left over after the methane is extracted and deposits it into the vermi-beds. Vermi-composting is the use of earthworms to accelerate the breakdown of organic matter into nutrient-rich, organic fertilizer. With an additional investment of 12,000 rupees (about $265), Mukesh constructed ten rectangular concrete beds where worms, water, and gobar perform their miraculous alchemy into the luscious compost that nourishes organic agriculture. Stick your hand into this earth. It is cool and alive, soft against the skin. It is the kind of earth you'd want your food to bathe in.

Every step of the way, Mukesh labors in the spirit of jugaad—that improvisational problem solving that keeps cropping up everywhere you go in India. He erects a shed and vermi-wash unit out of a broken pot and leaky tank. He designs a spinning wheel from scrap metal and a net to clean the manure of pebbles. He tries out his first batch of organic manure on his own fields before sharing his story with local farmers. Word begins to spread, and other farmers ask to use the fertilizer on their own crops. Mukesh happily sells them his product and buys a second cow.

A year after starting, Mukesh is on a roll. Three more big cows stand next to Kali, and they now have given birth to four young ones. The bio-gas plant is feeding a third kitchen and a new toilet. A cousin has leased him additional land, where he has constructed ninety more vermi-beds. The demand for Mukesh's organic manure has risen among local farmers. All in all, he is earning a *lakh* in profit—that's 100,000 rupees (more than $2,000). Growth, security, and a promising future are assured.

This is the microenterprise dream come true, isn't it? A small investment sets a family on its path toward self-sufficiency; over time, those small investments become larger and the family's future increasingly secure. Better still that Mukesh's small business yields a greater good for his local community—helping convert fellow farmers to a more sustainable form of agriculture.

Why, then, is Mukesh expressing doubt about that path? It's because his experiment has cast him onto that uncomfortable edge between transacting and gifting, between growth and sufficiency. "When the farmers started showing interest in the product, thoughts of big business and prosperity started circulating in my head," Mukesh tells you. "But later, I

had a different perspective about helping other farmers start their own production units, and I realized where my priorities lay. Instead of starting a business enterprise out of self-interest, I understood the advantage for our community if more farmers began production themselves—and what role I could play."

Mukesh is now cultivating a network of relationships among local farmers, many of whom are starting similar projects of their own. He is gifting his knowledge, his time, his assistance—while still selling his fertilizer. This is the path of *right livelihood*, a mindful way of living that balances service with self-interest, community vitality with economic security. This is what it might look like to transact in the market as little as necessary to sustain our health and well-being—while giving as much of ourselves as we can to our community.

But we live in a world that demands we participate in the marketplace. Once we get a taste of success, it can be exceedingly difficult to turn our back on it. Why is growth so seductive, anyway? This is a topic Manish has thought about a great deal. So let's return to Udaipur and end our journey in India the way we began, by reclining in the shade of the banyan tree, sipping a cup of chai and reflecting—this time with Manish—on the fundamental operating assumptions that drive our global transactional culture.

FROM GROWTH TO SUFFICIENCY

"For thousands of years, we've known that having more stuff doesn't give you happiness and fulfillment," Manish begins. "But that basic wisdom has slowly been eroded within the span of a couple of generations. Growth promises some illusion of greater freedom and security—if I accumulate more stuff, I don't have to depend on others, I don't have to negotiate with others, I have a new kind of power. The accumulation of stuff becomes our primary spiritual and psychological purpose and dominant social identity—rather than the quality of our relationships, our creativity, or our consciousness." Our transactional culture, he adds, assumes that there is some unlimited nature to this growth, that we can accumulate infinitely. And this may have something to do with our money system.

"What's different about money is its accumulative power," Manish continues. "Natural goods have a limited time to be consumed before they perish. Money is nonperishable, therefore seemingly infinite and immortal. It is an abstraction that defies both life and the limits of our mind, but defines our culture. And we are trapped in it."

In his book *The Future of Money*, Belgian economist Bernard Lietaer illuminates the absurdity of our transactional culture in which everyone seems to be "waiting for money." He writes:

> Imagine a Martian landing in a poor neighbourhood and seeing rundown communities, people sleeping in the streets, children without mentors or going hungry, trees and rivers dying from lack of care, ecological breakdowns and all of the other problems we face. He would also discover that we know exactly what to do about all these things. Finally, he would see that many people willing to work are either unemployed, or use only a part of their skills. He would see that many have jobs but are not doing the work they are passionate about. And that they are all waiting for money. Imagine the Martian asking us to explain what is that strange "money" thing we seem to be waiting for. Could you tell him with a straight face that we are waiting for an "agreement within a community to use something—really almost anything—as a medium of exchange"?
>
> And keep waiting?
>
> Our Martian might leave wondering whether there is intelligent life on this planet.[70]

Many people have analyzed how our global financial system arose from our shared agreements about money (you can learn more about this at the *Walk Out Walk On* website). But for now, let's consider just what we need to know about the relationship between money and growth to better understand Manish's point of view.

In his book *The End of Money and the Future of Civilization*, American economist Thomas Greco describes how banks create money out of thin air when they make loans against their reserves.[71] They then charge interest to account for risk and the passage of time. But when the bank issues the loan, it only creates enough money to account for the principal. It does not create the money that will be needed to pay for interest. Because there isn't enough money in the money system to pay for both the principal and the interest on a loan, the economy must grow so that more debt can be created to pay for the interest due. Otherwise, existing debts go into default, and people—or ultimately, the economy—collapse.

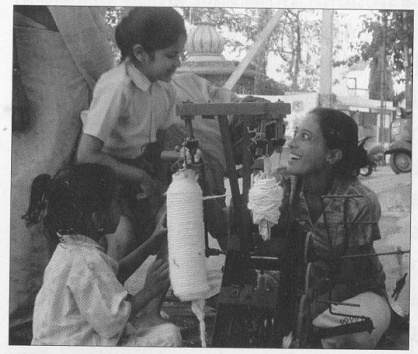
It's like a game of financial musical chairs where there just aren't enough seats to go around, and someone's got to get kicked out of the game.[72] We are stuck in a positive feedback loop, Greco says, where debt begets interest, and interest begets more debt. After a point, none of this has anything to do with the actual production of goods and services. We just need to keep growing fast enough to stay ahead of ourselves—and

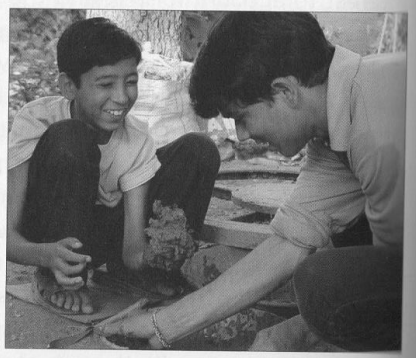
everyone else. So we run around in a frenzy, hoping we won't be the one left standing without a chair.

A growth imperative has been designed into the very DNA of our dominant economic system. Everywhere we look, we find people seeking to produce more and more, faster and faster. We measure businesses by their ability to increase year-over-year earnings. We expect farms to generate consistently higher crop yields. Doctors are meant to serve larger numbers of patients more rapidly. Even nonprofit organizations are frequently evaluated by how much their budget has grown. (How counterintuitive it must be for some, then, that Shikshantar declared its intention to shrink its budget from year to year. In 2003, its budget was about $22,000. By 2009, it had gone down to $13,000 while the organization's reach had tripled. This was accomplished by transitioning many expenses into gift culture, such as workshop space, food for events, and housing for guests; by deepening their practice of jugaad, thereby reducing their need to purchase items; and by strengthening their network of partnerships through which they created learning opportunities.)

Growth is one of our transactional culture's highest values. Greater production and greater consumption of stuff is a fundamental social value—so pervasive that we can't even see it, so pervasive that when a crisis hits, we're invited to go shopping. We trust in progress, confident that things will always get better; we're riding a trajectory of ingenuity and technological advance that has no end.

But as Manish points out, as a consequence of believing in unlimited growth, we're now living in a culture of destruction. "In transactional





Shikshantar's intergenerational experiments in gift culture invite learners to labor with their hands, including spinning cloth with the *charka* and working with clay.

culture, we use and throw away people, resources and ideas," he says. "Everything can be converted into a commodity until there's nothing sacred left. Land, water, air, seeds, even grandmother's cookies—our most intimate and profound aspects of life—are subject to this commodification. Gandhi talked about the notion of *trusteeship*: We are not really owners of anything. Nature doesn't work with ownership. We are guardians or trustees, stewarding resources that are part of a commons of human beings and life on the planet. We don't have a right to hoard things—or to mindlessly throw them away."

Gandhi saw trusteeship as a means of rebuilding an egalitarian society. It would be a pathway back toward right livelihood and sufficiency. He wrote, "Supposing I have come by a fair amount of wealth—either by way of legacy, or by means of trade and industry—I must know that all that wealth does not belong to me; what belongs to me is the right to an honourable livelihood, no better than that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community."[73]

When Mukesh walked out of the growth imperative, recognizing that he had enough and that everything else might be gifted to his community, he embodied trusteeship. There are movements of people everywhere, like Mukesh, who recognize what they already have and are working with it differently. They are the kabaad se jugaad practitioners throughout India and the upcyclers around the world who reconstitute their waste. They are the zero-waste movement members who aspire to use only those resources they can put back into circulation; the do-it-yourselfers who labor with their hands and their creativity to meet their most basic food and shelter needs; the developers in the open source software movement who give away their code so it can evolve collectively; and the community currency pioneers who are creating local living economies by experimenting with new forms of money—such as mutual credit systems and time-based currencies—that strengthen local relationships and rebuild the commons. (As recently as the 1980s, there were fewer than a hundred such currency systems in the world; today, some estimates put that figure as high as five thousand.[74]) Each of these groups has walked out of growth and walked on to sufficiency.

Gift culture is about trusteeship, about stewarding the commons rather than ourselves. It's about taking care of the whole so that everyone has enough. We offer what we can, and we value gifts on our own terms—rather than those dictated by the marketplace. We turn to one

another for our needs—to local businesses, teachers, artists, gardeners, craftspeople—rather than to the anonymity of the global marketplace. We walk out of our identity as *Homo economicus,* and we walk on to discover the patterns and practices of *Homo giftus.*

•••

The sun is setting over the streets of Udaipur as you drain the last drops of your chai. The city begins to soften as people make their way home to prepare dinner with their families. It is quiet, perhaps for the first time in what has been a very long, hot day. A garlanded cyclist rolls past hauling heavy bags in exchange for his dinner. A cow ambles by, pausing across the road to offer her gift of gobar to the commons. How gifts appear in the most surprising ways! As you doze off under the banyan tree, Tagore returns to your dreams, offering a parting poem asking us to notice how we've imprisoned ourselves in our transactional ways.

"Prisoner, tell me, who was it that bound you?"

"It was my master," said the prisoner.
"I thought I could outdo everybody in the world
in wealth and power,
and I amassed in my own treasure-house
the money due to my king.
When sleep overcame me I lay upon the bed
that was for my lord,
and on waking up I found I was a prisoner
in my own treasure-house."

"Prisoner, tell me, who was it that wrought
this unbreakable chain?"

"It was I," said the prisoner,
"who forged this chain very carefully.
I thought my invincible power
would hold the world captive
leaving me in a freedom undisturbed.
Thus night and day I worked at the chain
with huge fires and cruel hard strokes.
When at last the work was done
and the links were complete and unbreakable,
I found that it held me in its grip."[75]

TRANSACTING

In Western culture, it's easy to hear these expressions in everyday conversations: "What's in it for me?" "What will I get out of this?" "I owe you one." Do you ever hear yourself saying any of these? When you're home, do you ever bargain with your children, bribing them to be quiet, using candy to get them to do what you want, or threatening them with what you'll take away if their bad behavior continues?

If any of these behaviors are familiar, welcome to the culture of *Homo economicus*. Even if we don't want to participate in this way of living, even if we know how destructive it is to be constantly bargaining and negotiating, it's very difficult to escape its grasp.

Consumer culture needs us to be mindless and hungry. It constantly tells us that we need more and more, that whatever we have isn't enough. We're urged to consume as much as we can as the means to keep our current way of life flourishing. If we cease to consume, we'll need fewer things, and fewer people will be employed. This is the tragic dilemma of our time—we can't stop consuming without causing more suffering even when we realize that we can't alleviate our real suffering by consuming.

This is the world that Tagore foresaw: "The greed of gain has no time or limit to its capaciousness. Its one object is to produce and consume." We're urged to accumulate as much as we can so we'll feel safe and secure. We're taught how to compute and negotiate so that we get the best deal, so no one takes advantage of us. These dynamics are very compelling; better to get the upper hand, better to drive the hard bargain, better to win. It's easy to get caught up in the game—and you get a lot of nice stuff.

These messages are so powerful in modern global culture that it takes a great deal of awareness and discipline to silence their seductive lures. If we don't like what's happening to ourselves, our children, our colleagues, and our communities as we continue down the path of endless accumulation, then we need to reclaim the life we want. As at Shikshantar, we can practice swaraj, self-rule. We can practice swaraj by turning off the insistent cries of consumerism. We can think about what we really need, when

enough's enough. We can consider how we want to feel at the end of our lives, what achievements will have enduring value.

Swaraj recalls us to who we want to be as human beings, past the glitter and junk of consumerism, past the superficial and meaningless transactions. Swaraj restores us to a healthy self-interest, where we exercise our freedom, self-confidence and creativity for the benefit of many, where we focus on who we want to become and what we want to contribute—not for gain, but as gift.

How are the demands of consumer culture impacting you, your family, your community?

GIFTING

At Shikshantar, we witnessed the same creativity, inventiveness, love, and joy that were evident at Unitierra in Mexico, among the warriors in Brazil, at the GreenHouse in Joubert Park, in the circles at Kufunda. How do people without material things, with very few resources except themselves and each other, create such happiness?

These are all gifting communities. You may have noted how much support they gave each other, how when they learned a new skill or created an invention, they were quick to share this with friends and neighbors. We didn't see them hesitating or holding things back for themselves. They weren't asking "What can I get for this?" They wanted to know, "How can this serve?" And they trusted that others would want to serve them.

Gift culture nourishes us in deeply satisfying ways. As we share our skills and discoveries, and then have our gifts greeted with enthusiasm, we feel inspired to keep creating. We discover our own capacity for creativity and for generosity. It's hard to retreat into self-interest when your neighbors are so delighted by what you've just given them.

Gifting sets in motion a cycle of generosity where one gift prompts another. As generosity grows, emotions that destroy relationships, especially jealousy and competition, recede. These strong emotions place blinders on us, we don't want to see people's talents or acknowledge their skills. We think that by shrinking them, we'll feel better about ourselves. In a generous society, we don't need to reduce others in order to feel superior. We start to enjoy each other, even encourage each other. Once we experience this quality of community, it's hard to go back to pettiness and jealousy. We're so much more gifted, all of us, in a generous society.

Most of us already know this, even as we're struggling with transactional culture. We've had experiences of working together without thought of personal gain; we've shared moments of hard yet purposeful work that gave us more satisfaction than any object or paycheck ever could. These experiences, wherever they've occurred, give us a glimpse of how humans are meant to live together.

What creates lasting happiness in life? What few things become most important as we approach the end of life? Isn't it about family and relationships? Isn't it that we've contributed, that in some small way we've made life better for our children, for others, for the future?

We can reclaim our own wisdom. Wouldn't we all rather live together as *Homo giftus?*

Where might you next offer your talents, ideas, and skills as gifts?

AN INVITATION TO EXPERIMENT

Work flows through us and not from us. We do not own our intellect, our creativity, or our skills. We have received them as a gift and grace. We pass them on as a gift and grace; it is like a river which keeps flowing. All the tributaries make the river great.

—Satish Kumar

What would it feel like to experience our work as gift and grace, streaming through us, one small tributary in a great river flowing to the future?

When we speak of offering work as a gift, it doesn't mean that we stop charging money for our services. We have to be realistic about the world we live in. But we can change *how we offer* our work at more subtle levels. We can notice all the strings we attach to our efforts—our need for approval, recognition, status, appreciation—and think about whether we want to cut them.

If you'd like to experiment with exploring your work as gift, here are some things to consider about gifts and gifting. A gift is a gift when:

> I offer it freely. There are no conditions. I give it because I want people to have it. I do not need to gain from it personally.
>
> I let go of needing the gift to be appreciated. I don't call attention to how hard I've worked, what it's taken me to get here, how dedicated and committed I am, what a good generous person I am.
>
> I don't look for approval, recognition, or thanks. I offer my work, then turn away. I don't stand and wait for compliments. I don't expect any kind of gratitude. I don't resent the people who didn't thank me.
>
> I let go of what I just offered. I move on, looking for the next place I might contribute.

It's not easy to change from our transactional mindset to these high standards of gifting. But it's worth a try. As we notice the emotional price tags we place on our work, we can choose to let go of them. Little by little, we can snip the strings that keep us from knowing the free and open space of generosity. As we discover the delights of gifting, we also begin to recognize the gifts that others are offering to us. In this way, generosity grows, creating relationships of immeasurable value.